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ABSTRACT

In three sections, this paper discusses and describes Peer Assisted Leadership (PAL) training from the perspective of two experienced trainers within the context of principals' work lives. PAL training is an intensive 6-day experience in which participants acquire skills in onsite observation, reflective interviewing, theme identification, and model building. The first section compares and contrasts PAL with principals' work realities. Out of this analysis emerges the second section, a list of specific presentation guidelines that mean to assist current and future PAL trainers to minimize training problems and maximize problem-solving. The final section suggests applications of PAL's components and skills in other professonal development programs. It also includes a generic administrative training support model that integrates PAL with other activities designed to help principals bridge workshop experiences and the work realities of the principalship. (JAM)

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# Peer Assisted Leadership From a Trainer's Perspective: Implications for Practice

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## Peer Assisted Leadership From a Trainer's Perspective: Implications for Practice

Over the past five years, approximately 250 site administrators have participated in peer-assisted leadership (PAL) training. Developed at the Far West Laboratories for Educational Research, this training program provides an intensive six-day experience in which participants acquire skills in on-site observation, reflective interviewing, theme identification, and model building. The six sessions typically take place over a five- to seven-month period so that participants may visit one another's campuses at least four times and conduct subsequent interviews. At the first meeting, participants select partners with whom they work intensively during the training process. At the final meeting, based on background interviews, on-site visits (shadows), and reflective interviews, each participant presents a detailed model of his or her partner's professional life. This model includes: background and beliefs, experiences, environmental conditions, routine behaviors, organizational norms, and student outcomes.

This paper discusses PAL from the perspective of two trainers who have employed PAL in numerous settings that include bush Alaska, suburban California, and urban Massachusetts. It consists of three sections. The first section compares and contrasts PAL with principals' work realities. Out of this analysis emerges the second section, a list of specific presentation guidelines that are meant to assist current and future PAL trainers. The final section suggests applications of PAL's components and skills in other professional

development programs. This third section includes a generic administrative training support model that integrates PAL with other activities designed to help principals bridge workshop experiences and the work realities of the principalship.

## SECTION I: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING *PAL* WITH PRINCIPALS' WORKLIVES

Before commencing this analysis, additional elements of the PAL program need to be described. Figure 1 displays a typical timeline for PAL training activities.

[Figure 1 here]

Meeting 1 provides an overview of PAL, engages participants in partner selection, guides partners through detailed background interviews, and equips participants to conduct their first shadows. During the second meeting, participants discuss their first shadow experience, acquire preliminary reflective interviewing skills, and conduct their first reflective interviews. By Meeting 3, participants have completed their second shadows and reflective interviews, and are ready to learn advanced reflective interviewing skills. During this session, participants practice advanced reflective interviewing skills, and begin identifying potential themes to be explored in their partners' worklives. Partners then complete their third shadow and reflective interview, focusing more narrowly on observation data closely associated with identified themes. In Meeting 4, participants construct preliminary "models" of their partners' worklives. These

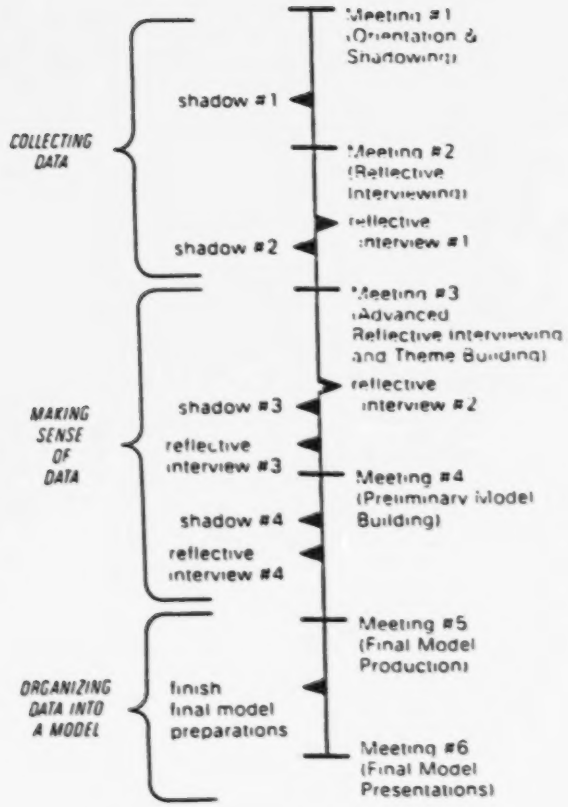


FIGURE 1: PAL'S TIMELINE

models are visual representations that specify relationships among such factors as school, community, and district characteristics; principal belief systems; curriculum/instruction; climate; principals' behavior and student outcomes. The fourth shadow and reflective interview occur by Meeting 5 when participants conclude model preparation. At Meeting 6, PAL participants celebrate one another and their association together as they publicly present their partners with the models they have constructed. During some of these final sessions, participants have discussed future plans for continued collegial work.

Not suprisingly, these six meetings and related homework place substantial time demands on participants. Since each shadow lasts two to four hours and reflective interviews average 45 minutes to an hour, already-busy principals will devote a total of at least 70 hours to PAL. Most painfully for participants, 80 percent of these hours pull them away from their campuses.

Furthermore, as principals move back and forth between PAL activities and their routine principal worklife, they experience extreme contrasts. PAL emphasizes abstract thinking, extensive data collection, and intimate collegiality. But at their schools, principals make frequent concrete decisions based on limited data. Although these decisions involve interactions with students, teachers, and parents, principals' work is isolated from professional peers.

The contrasts principals experience between PAL and their schools have implications for the design of training. A thorough analysis of factors from these two environments will fuel our subsequent discussion of training implications.

Contrast 1

Peterson (1984) has characterized the principal's worklife as one marked by "brevity, fragmentation, and variety." Approximately 85 percent of the tasks a principal undertakes last nine minutes or less. This task-oriented focus is frequently diverted by interruptions from the outside. These are often originated by forces outside the principal's control: parents, board members, and individuals of the community. Principals also experience a wide variety of emotions and demands, such as those presented by needy children, cranky parents, broken plumbing, teacher evaluations, budget management, newsletter writing... the list goes on endlessly.

In PAL, principals have long time blocks for a few tasks such as shadowing and reflection. This slow, contemplative pace is quite unlike the reactive, fast-clipped nature of principal daily work.

Contrast 2

Principals make concrete, often convergent decisions frequently throughout a day: designing schedules, assigning individuals to tasks, completing paperwork, placing students, responding to requests. PAL activities direct the principal to move beyond concrete data collected during "shadows" to abstract scenes that depict relationships among various components of a hypothetical framework.

[Figure 2]

Contrast 3

While the principal interacts with hundreds of individuals on a daily basis, there is no role alike person with whom to consult on site. Often, the principal makes decisions in the isolation of an office, wishing for someone to "talk it through with" or "another ear to bounce it off of." These decisions are frequently confidential and the principal alone is accountable.

PAL immediately involves the principal with other "role-alike" individuals in an environment characterized by norms of experimentation, trust, and collegiality. There is public sharing of data that heretofore might have been shared only inwardly—between a principal and him- or herself. Partner work in the shadowing and reflective interviewing process provides the principal with another set of eyes, a mirror, previously non-existent on site. Initially, some principals experience a sense of culture shock in a context so alien to that of their typical workplace. Eventually, however, the training environment becomes a haven. There is a spirit of mutual understanding, respect, and interdependence among group members who come together from isolated settings into the PAL experience. Principals report feeling supported, understood, cared for, and valued.

Contrast 4

From the time a principal enters the building, often until the time his or her head rests on a pillow that evening, he or she is faced with a rapid-fire of decision making which requires quick reactions, often based on scanty data.

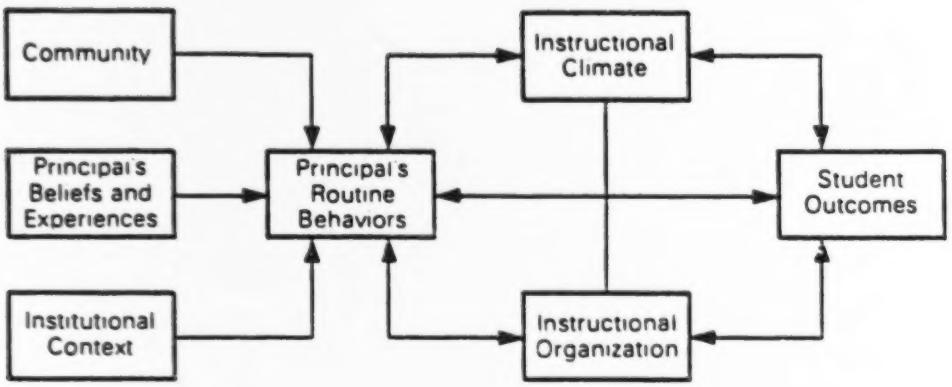


FIGURE 2: PAL FRAMEWORK

Unlike this experience, the PAL process provides a predictable series of events from the background interviews, shadows, and reflective interviews, during which data is amassed, patterns and themes examined, hypotheses formed and tested—all before decisions are made. Energies are focused in a deliberate, anticipated fashion.

Contrast 5

The principal is bombarded by tasks to be accomplished on a daily basis. This produces the "get the job done" orientation in an atmosphere crowded with checklists, schedules, people of all ages, demands, and the public eye. Principals talk of problem-solving "on the fly," feeling rushed, rarely sitting—making snap judgments in the interest of time.

PAL invokes a reflective, relaxed environment in which principals have time to think, analyze, put disparate experiences and observations together in a creative collage, with patterns and images a desired product of complex thinking.

Contrast 6

Few principals report that they were adequately prepared by pre-service experiences for the work realities of the principalship. Many describe an education provided by "on-the-job" experiences. There are seldom models to follow for specific practices: getting dogs off the playground, comforting a child who has lost his milk money, lending an understanding hand to a parent who has just been informed of her child's learning disability. The principal's world is one of "trial by fire." Principals receive an even shallower craft

training than do teachers who, at a minimum, benefit from student teacher experiences.

PAL shadows, reflective interviews, and meetings provide frequent opportunities to observe partner's professional practices. Specifically, PAL asks each participant to devote 8 to 12 hours in intensive, detailed, comprehensive observation of these practices, and later requires reflective thinking about the cause-and-effect relationships.

Contrast 7

Schools are judged in part by outward appearances: attractive displays, litter-free playgrounds, clean bathrooms, graffiti-free walls, immaculate halls and shiny floors. Test scores, regular education, and special programs are frequently publicized. "Looking good" counts toward principal job security and upward mobility.

PAL activities address the invisible side of leadership. While the focus begins on the external side of practice in the shadow, the principal is soon asked to "go inside" to find answers to his or her partner's questions during the reflective interviews.

## Table 1

**Differences Between Principal's Worklife and PAL Training**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Brevity, fragmentation, and variety | 1. Long time blocks for reflection and analysis |
| 2. Concrete, convergent decision making | 2. Abstract, divergent decision making |
| 3. Isolation, privacy, self-determination, heirarchical social structure | 3. Intimacy, collegiality, public sharing, and group interdependence |
| 4. Rapid problem-solving based on limited data | 4. Slow, deliberate problem-solving based on extensive data |
| 5. Task-oriented "get the job done" atmosphere | 5. Reflective, creative atmosphere that emphasizes complex thinking |
| 6. Self-taught, few models of specific practices | 6. Opportunities to observe partner's professional practices |
| 7. "Looking good" counts: person, programs, schools | 7. Focus on invisible aspects of leadership, cause-effect relationships, thinking, and feeling |

## SECTION II: PRESENTATION SUGGESTIONS

The previous section analyzed the differences principals experience in thinking, values, and norms as they participate in PAL. This section describes four training problems that result from these contrasts, and then outlines specific solutions.

Problem 1

Some PAL components appeal immediately to participants but others cause principals a sense of awkwardness and discomfort. On the easy side, principals quickly see the value of the framework and shadowing procedures. The thoroughness and simplicity of the framework makes it immediately useful. Shadowing looks and feels much like the anecdotal records or script tapes that currently pervade teacher supervision/evaluation efforts.

On the down side, trainers may anticipate difficulties as participants select their partners, especially if principals already have long-standing personal or professional relationships. Participants will avoid pairing with individuals seen as professional losers, or with whom they have had previous conflicts.

Many principals routinely employ counseling skills for evaluating and improving teachers from a stance of institutional and technical superiority. When these same individuals are asked to reflectively interview peers without offering judgments or suggestions, trainers may predict principal responses such as "Why

do we have to beat around the bush?" or "Why can't we just tell them what's wrong and fix it?"

Theme building and model construction pose the greatest obstacles for most principals as they are asked to induce simple, resonant, cause-and-effect relationships based on complex and often conflicting data. The thought processes required to build these models, hypothesis creation and testing, varies so sharply from normative principal thought that participants require extra verbal support and explanation. Trainers may rely on several approaches to minimize principals' anxieties in the "difficult" parts of the training:

- carefully model expectations
- provide opportunities for pairs to practice
- during overview of training on Day 1, identify areas of ease and discomfort. Review them when introducing each element.

Problem 2: Scheduling

PAL requires each participant to set aside a total of 70 or more hours, out of frequently already over-busy calendars, for 14 to 22 separately scheduled activities*. The obstacles presented by scheduling should not be overlooked and may be minimized by:

- asking each participant to avoid "dropping by school" on the way to PAL training.
- arranging shadow and reflective interview appointments during the preceding training session.

* Each participant attends six training sessions, shadows four times, use shadows four times, provides four reflective interviews, and receives four reflective interviews, for a total of 22 activities. If partners overlap shadowing and reflective interviewing on a single visit, only 14 events or activities may be necessary.

- developing an explicit policy among participants for rescheduling unavoidable cancellations of shadow or interview appointments. For example, "If a principal cancels a shadow or interview, she is responsible for contacting her partner and rescheduling at her partner's convenience."
- commencing PAL early in the school year, perhaps August, and having sessions scheduled into the district-published calendar.
- avoiding preholidays and semester break times, and other extra-busy times for principals.

Problem 3: Anxious Participants

The differences between school and PAL often provoke a high degree of anxiety among some participants. Since the expression of these concerns may interfere with presentations and may even cause participants to permanently drop out, the following solutions are proposed.

- Create an environment built on trust where diversity, risk taking, and experimentation are valued.
- Seat potentially anxious participants among calm and up-beat participants.
- When concerns are publicly voiced, actively listen and then cite testimonials or anecdotes from previous trainings.
- Invite other participants to share success experiences related to the anxious participants' concerns.

- Seek out anxious participants at breaks or after the session by telephone. Talk with them about their concerns. Help problem solve.
- In all cases, actively listen to concerns, zero in on fundamental issues, and offer strategies to resolve the problem. Often simple listening will be sufficient.

Problem 4: Influencing Group Politics

Far more than conventional, skill-based administrator training, PAL's success relies on the quality of interactions of group members. As the sessions progress, the sharing and increasing intimacy of partners builds a climate of support and caring that participants find essential to complete program expectations. However, the composition of groups varies so widely that trainers must carefully tailor the support strategies to meet the group's needs. For example, consider a PAL group composed entirely of veteran principals from the same small district. In this group, everyone "knows" everyone and previous rivalries and animosities may destroy all planned activities. On the other hand, a skilled trainer may allow the group to dramatically increase its level of mutual trust and mutual respect. The following list of techniques will assist the development of positive group climate.

- Locate the trainings away from district office. Otherwise participants will be more likely to remain "stuck" in their old roles. Also, fewer interruptions by central office staff will improve camaraderie.
- Explicitly establish the group's norm early on the first day. Chart these norms and base them on PAL's Golden Rules.
- Vary seat arrangements so that over the training each participant has opportunities to sit near several other participants.

- Include frequent cross-partner sharing sessions. These breakdown barriers and allow participants an opportunity to "crow" about the accomplishments of their partners,.
- If many participants in the group have worked together previously, inquire discreetly about the group's culture and previous history. Pay particular attention to identifying hot spots of animosities and locate individuals who are generally perceived as "poor" administrators. Also note who may be the "priest" or "priestess" in the group.
- In the pair selection process, urge participants to select partners with different backgrounds: male/female, elementary/middle school/high school, veteran/novice, etc. The richness and novelty experienced by these participants will energize and inform the entire group.
- Brief central office on the processes, outcomes, and support requirements of PAL. These briefings should occur before PAL begins and should be reinforced between sessions.
- Remind participants of the norm of confidentiality and insist that central office staff <u>not</u> freely visit the sessions. It takes just one surprise visit by a central office manager to destroy the confidentiality that PAL requires.

## SECTION III: PAL AND OTHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Particular elements and skills from the PAL program may be employed to strengthen other professional development programs in a variety of ways.

### Application 1: Principal Support Groups

Principal support groups have been formed in many settings throughout the country. It is often the case, however, that the individuals who come together for this function have no way to communicate easily. Initial dialogue is halted, somewhat stilted, awkward, and shallow. The background interview element from PAL provides a structured way for principals to learn about one another through an intensive questioning process. Since norms governing inter-group member relationships have many times not yet been formed in new groups, this interview process provides an opportuinity for individuals to get to know one another quickly, form connections for collegial support, and feel safe using the framework in an interesting, legitimate process.

### Application 2: Assessment for School Improvement

Shadowing, PAL's process for following an individual around and collecting observable rather than inferential data, is an activity that can also be a useful element of a school needs assessment

process. In this context, instead of partners collecting data on one another, students or teachers can be shadowed so that what they experience as they go through a day can be made public. These data provide insights into the totalities and complexities of school life that can be gathered in no other way. In particular, the linkages between curriculum areas, the impact of varying teacher expectations for students, and the fundamental flavor of teachers' worklives are highlighted. This is valuable information for school-level planners engaging in school improvement efforts.

Application 3: Supervision and Evaluation Training

The reflective interview instruction provided during PAL training can be a valuable addition to supervision or evaluation training. Its approach emphasizes moving from concrete data in shadow records to question building, generating inferences, forming hypotheses, and developing questions to gather additional information to confirm or negate the hypotheses. This process heightens the supervisor's awareness of critical issues to be highlighted and pursued during conference planning and implementation. Reflective interviewing guidelines emphasize moving from an objective, observable data base. Together with the hypotheses-generating approach, the technique assists in "keeping practices separate from people" (Little, 1981), which is essential if a positive, growth-oriented climate is to be developed as a result of the conferencing process.

Application 4: Collegial Professional Development

Many administrators have increased the amount of feedback about instruction within a building by engaging teachers in cooperative professional development (Glatthorn, 1983). This involves teachers who volunteer observing one another and discussing their observations. Shadowing and reflective interviewing techniques can be powerful tools in this process.

Application 5: Skill-Focused Followup

The techniques of shadowing and reflective interviewing can also be employed to provide feedback that is designed to assist participants in transferring skills learned in workshops to the workplace. For example, during leadership training, principals might acquire new meeting-management skills. Following training, partners can shadow one another as they plan and conduct actual meetings. Reflective interviewing provides valuable feedback regarding the implementation of training techniques and their effects.

Application 6: The PAL Framework

The PAL framework provides an organizational structure for examining the relationship among prior experiences, beliefs, environmental factors, routine behaviors, climate, and student performance. It has been employed as a useful construct for other types of administrative training such as school culture, using student performance data to improve instruction, and improving school-

community relations. The framework provides a concrete way of examining the interplay of factors and their outcomes.

Application 7: Generic Support Model for Administrator Training

This model has the following components:

- a definition of peer support,
- techniques for introducing peer support to participants,
- a menu of peer-support activities,
- specific expectations for frequencies and durations of activities,
- techniques for training participants in support activities,
- approaches for integrating peer support activities into workshop content, and
- procedures for reporting peer-support activities to colleagues and presenters.

The model relies on success indicators as measures of long-term support effectiveness. If the support model is successful, then:

1. participants will report that peer-support activities were professionally worthwhile, helpful, and "worth the time."
2. most participants will report frequent peer activities between sessions.
3. participants will report that they adjusted peer support activities according to their own personal, specific needs.
4. consultants will report that peer support activities enriched and extended the workshop content.

These peer-support activities should be introduced with a review of the research rationale for peer support, including an

emphasis on the necessity of these activities to bridge from the workshop to the workplace. Participants should be asked to describe peer support in its ideal state—what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like. Participants should then create a name to describe these activites, ground rules for implementation, and a list of possible activities.

Activity Menu

- Structure pair work during periodic network meetings.
- Pair phone calls on a scheduled basis.
- Use previous participants as resources.
- Schedule site visits just to see a partner's work environment.
- Conduct a PAL shadow at a partner's site.
- Visit a partner's site with a specific observation focus, problem to be solved, or coaching objective.
- Conduct a PAL background interview.
- Extend specific workshop activity by co-planning and perhaps practicing a newly learned management skill.
- Keep ongoing reflective journals and periodically share themes or issues with partner.
- Conduct PAL reflective interviews.

This paper has examined PAL training in the context of principals' worklives. Contrasts, insights, and adaptations have been discussed. Presentation guidelines have been offered to increase the usefulness and applicability of PAL procedures. Finally, inferences have been made that suggest how PAL processes can be integrated

with other training ventures to lend strength, interest, and to promote increased skill transfer. This paper is meant as a starting place, not an end. It is hoped that further discussion and networking around these and related issues will increase its value to others.

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